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THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

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"Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life."— JOHN xi. 23–26.

"If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith also vain."— 1 COR. xv. 14.

IN the first of these passages Martha speaks of the resurrection as something future: Jesus speaks of it as something present. To her it was the return to life of the body which had been laid in the grave: to Jesus it was the ascent of the soul to God, which can take place now, and over which death has no power. "He who believeth in me"— that is, who has my inspiration in his soul — "shall never die." To him death is nothing. He cannot come back to life, because he has never ceased to live. He cannot come up out of the grave, for he has never gone down into the grave. He rises out of the bodily and earthly life into a higher life. That is the resurrection.

It is a little strange that the Christian Church should so often have preferred Martha's view of the resurrection to that of Jesus. The Church has usually taught that the resurrection is a coming back to the bodily life, a rising out of the grave at some future time. This contradicts the distinct declaration of Jesus that there is no death to those who have his faith, and therefore no coming back

from death. Yet Christians speak habitually of a general resurrection at the last day, when the graves shall be opened and shall give up their dead. The reason of this relapse into Naturalism is the difficulty of apprehending spiritual facts and laws. There is always this tendency to take an outward, material, and literal view of spiritual facts; for this makes them seem more real and palpable. The New Testament, indeed, speaks of the resurrection, or rising up, of the body; that is, of a bodily ascent into higher conditions. But this was changed afterward into a resurrection "of the flesh," though the apostle distinctly says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." The apostle also speaks of a present resurrection, and says, "If ye, then, be risen in Christ, seek those things that are above"; and, again, "Ye are risen with Christ through faith." So he teaches, just as his Master had taught, that resurrection is an ascent into a higher state of soul and body.

The essential fact of the resurrection, therefore, according to Christ and Paul, is not the rising from the grave, or a visible, bodily return to life, but the ascent of the spirit into the spiritual realm. The essential fact in the resurrection of Jesus was this: that he was not dead; that he did not die; that death had no dominion over him; that he had gone up into a superior world, and yet was able to come to his friends below, to teach them, to influence them, and be with them always to the end of the age. The questions of *how* he rose, with what body he came, in what way he showed himself,—these were all secondary and unessential. It was enough that the disciples saw him, knew him to be alive, knew that he was not defeated, that he was coming as the Messiah to establish his kingdom.

This was the all-important conviction which gave new life to their souls.

In this sense, especially, is the resurrection of Jesus a great and vital truth of Christianity, which must never be relinquished. It is impossible for us now to discover, and therefore needless for us to ask, the details of the great event. The accounts are too confused and contradictory. All that the disciples were really able to say with certainty was: "The Lord has risen: we have seen him. It is not his ghost: it is himself." A veil of mystery hangs between us and this transaction. Did Christ rise in the same body, to be afterward changed into the spiritual body? or did his spiritual body appear like his natural body? We cannot tell. Paul, who lays such immense stress on the main facts of the resurrection of Jesus, does not elucidate these questions. He declared that he himself was a witness of the resurrection. But we know that Paul saw Jesus long after he had risen: he saw Jesus on the way to Damascus, in the midst of a great light shining out of heaven. He had not seen Jesus *rise*, but saw him in his risen and ascended state; and that was to Paul the resurrection. The essence of the resurrection of Jesus was his present life in the higher world, and his continued interest in the progress of his gospel below. The true Messiah to be preached through all the world was not an earthly king, but a risen and spiritual Master.

What, then, are the facts which we certainly know in regard to the resurrection of Jesus?

It is an undoubted and undeniable fact that the disciples of Jesus, after his crucifixion, were firmly convinced that he was not dead, but alive. They declared that he had manifested himself to them, and this faith has always con-

tinued in the Church to this time. The festival of Easter, the most sacred day in the Christian year, was kept from the beginning, and is a continued testimony to the faith of the Church in the rising of Jesus from death into a higher life.

Another undoubted fact is that this faith was a central and vital power in building up Christianity. When Jesus died on the cross, the faith and hope of the disciples died also. If they had not become somehow firmly convinced that he was still living and could give them power to do his work, how could they ever have regained their courage and their strength? We know as a fact that they did acquire such a power of conviction and purpose that they spread themselves and their doctrine over the whole Roman Empire, and in a few centuries converted it to Christ. They themselves said that their power came from faith in their risen Master.

It is also a fact that there has been from the first in the Christian world a confident persuasion of the reality of the future life quite different from any belief elsewhere. This persuasion of immortality does not come from argument or reasoning. It has been transmitted through the Church from the beginning as an inheritance into which we are all born. We grow up from childhood with this implicit conviction. It has come down from father to son, from mother to daughter, as an unquestioned belief. The arguments of sceptics produce no effect upon us; for the roots of this conviction go down below the region of argument,—it is a part of our life. It is not an opinion to which we assent, but a conviction in which we live. In the light of this immortal hope we bid farewell to those we love, who go into the silent land, not as an unknown

region, but as a world full of saints and angels, where the dear lost shall come to meet us again

"Lovelier in heaven's sweet climate, yet the same."

This is not a dead belief, but a living faith. It is continually fed by the strong conviction, born eighteen centuries ago, from the resurrection of Jesus. Like a mighty river, it rolls on from age to age, making its desert shores green and the homes of men peaceful and full of hope.

And now do we ask why faith in the resurrection of Christ is so essential to the progress of man, why it is so central in Christianity? Not because of any theory we may have about the outward facts narrated in the Gospels, nor because of any hypothesis we may cherish as to the nature of the future life. It is because the resurrection of Jesus makes of him a present Saviour and Master. It is not the past event, but that which comes out of it. It is because Christ, being raised from the dead, dieth no more. It is because he ever liveth to make intercession for us. It is because he is now the Resurrection and the Life, lifting us out of our sins and filling us with God's love.

This is why Paul said, "If Christ be not risen, our preaching is vain, and your faith also is vain." If Christ be not risen, there is no living Christ now to be the source of our faith and hope and love.

But Christ *has* risen. He has ceased to be only a Jewish prophet, a Jewish Messiah: he has become the Saviour of the world. He has brought life and immortality to light. He has filled the earth with the sense of a Divine Presence and a Divine Love. He has taught us all to say "Our Father." He has planted deep in our souls, far

below the region of argument, theory, and hypothesis, this faith in immortal being. He has brought heaven near to earth. He does not tell us of a resurrection at the last day, but of a present resurrection, of a life with God now, which takes from us all doubts and fears as regards death and as regards the life hereafter.

The reality of the appearance of Jesus on Easter morning is, always has been, and always will be, the faith of the Christian Church. From this conviction it still draws its life, courage, and hope. This faith fills the soul with a sense of immortality. It abolishes death, and enables us to feel and say as our Christian brother Longfellow has said,—

"There is no death: what seems so is transition."

Or as Taylor has said,—

"Life never dies;
Body dies off it, and it lives elsewhere."

Or as Tennyson said to his departed friend,—

"Known and unknown human, divine,
Sweet human hand and lips and eye;
Dear heavenly friend that canst not die,
Mine, mine, forever, ever mine."

Or as Whittier says,—

"I long for household voices gone,
For vanished smiles I long;
But God has led my dear ones on,
And he can do no wrong.

"I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.

"And so, beside the silent sea,
I wait the muffled oar;
No harm from Him can come to me,
On ocean or on shore."

All true poetry is prophecy: it looks through the seen to the unseen, and thus the poets have been teachers of immortality from the beginning.

There are many who, like Theodore Parker, find it impossible to accept the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. Their reasons are the supposed impossibility of the event. They regard it as a violation of the laws of nature, which is impossible. Their objection is not to the evidence. There is evidence enough of the resurrection, if the fact itself were credible. It is the antecedent impossibility of the transaction which is the ground of their rejecting it. Their objections are *a priori* objections. Assuming that the resurrection of Jesus means the return of a dead man to bodily life, there is certainly a violation of natural law, so far as we can understand the nature of life and of death. It would be opposed to all experience. But it is certain that the resurrection of Jesus cannot mean this. It was not a return to earthly life. Under every view we can take of it a great change had taken place. He did not come back to resume his human relations and to live as he had done before. He was on his way up. He soon disappeared from mortal view.

Now no one can say that it is a violation of any law of nature for those who have died to the earthly body to continue to live in a higher condition. Nor is there anything incredible in their being able to show themselves, and to have some communion with their friends on earth. This may be improbable, but it is certainly not impossible. To

those who take this view of the resurrection of Jesus there is, therefore, no violation of any natural law. There is seen in it something more interesting and valuable; namely, one all-important fact to show that the life of the soul is not bound to that of the body.

When I consider the resurrection of Jesus, I do not, therefore, regard it so much as a stupendous miracle, but rather as a revelation of universal law. As he rose, we shall rise. Christ was the first fruits, the first visible revelation of that ascent which is a law of our being. In proportion to the power of faith, conscience, and love in us, we rise to higher life. When Jesus rose, the veil which hides heaven from human eyes was for a moment lifted, and the disciples looked into the higher world. The heavenly Father saw fit to open the heavens, so that one great impression might be made of the spiritual world.

And thus, since Christ is ours and we are his, we have faith that we, too, shall rise. We live surrounded by the spirits of the pure and the perfect, the loving and beloved. We live not in a world of death, but in one of life and immortality. In the resurrection of Jesus we see the triumph of life over death; and thus through all time, when the morning of Easter returns, it will bring with it fresh hope, faith, and courage to the hearts of men. It will console anew the mourner, and be a perpetual spring of comfort and joy.